

Focus on a Federation Member: The Border Belt Farmers Museum

By Charles Kemp, Co-Curator, Border Belt Farmers Museum

The Border Belt Farmers Museum was the brain child of local historian and WWII veteran Wiley R. Taylor, Jr. After successfully writing the town's history with the assistance of a committee, Taylor moved on to a project he had long eyed and actively sought—the conversion of the town's unused railroad depot into a museum highlighting Fairmont's historic connection to agriculture and particularly tobacco. This work began in 1988 and was completed in 1989. Community volunteers at first served as greeters leading tours through the many exhibits which featured lumber, cotton, and tobacco memorabilia.

In 1998 a retired business woman, Lib Haywood, was hired as permanent curator, and the museum was opened for tours on Monday, Wednesday, and Friday from 11 a.m. until 3 p.m. In January 2014 former Mayor Charles Kemp joined Haywood on Tuesday and Thursday from 9 a.m. to noon and 1 p.m. to 3 p.m. Co-Curators Lib Haywood (910-740-8645) or Charles Kemp (910-740-0277) will be happy to discuss the museum or offer travel directions and further information.

The museum is housed inside the former railroad depot, which was an integral part of the town's past for 80 years. During the first few years of the twentieth century, the Atlantic Coast Line railroad placed tracks in the town to help ship lumber, cotton, and tobacco to manufacturing points in other areas of the state. It also provided a smaller transportation role for passengers both east and west of the community.



Come to the Border Belt Farmers Museum, which is housed in Fairmont's former railroad depot.

As a result of the rapid growth in the production and sale of tobacco, several major companies utilized the railroad to ship the golden leaf to their processing plants in Winston-Salem and Durham. Tobacco grew to a top spot in the local economy as evidenced by the following statistics: In 1919, 6.9 million pounds of tobacco were sold, and \$1.8 million was paid to farmers for a \$26.34 per 100 pound average. By 1951, 58.7 million pounds were grown and \$31.5 million was paid to farmers, for a \$53.68 per 100 pound average. This tremendous growth in tobacco pumped much-needed money into the local economy and cemented tobacco as "king" in Fairmont. By 1955 the town had become known as the "biggest little tobacco market in the world" and was promoted avidly by tobacco sales supervisor Charlie Stafford who arrived from Clarksville, Tennessee, in 1937 to assume this role. The town bustled with economic growth and commercial success throughout the 1960s and into the 1970s. With the advent of regulations curbing the appeal of tobacco and the demise of the textile industry,

the railroad was no longer needed, and the Atlantic Coast Line removed the tracks in the 1980s, thus ending the need for the railroad depot.

Today the Border Belt Farmers Museum & Welcome Center stands as a historical focal point for a community that boasts a proud connection with a rich agricultural past. Within its walls are hundreds of vivid exhibits of the lumber, cotton, and tobacco eras which proved successful in the community. Central among the exhibits are cotton bales, large timber and milling saws, facades of tobacco barns, drags, stringing equipment, shipping barrels called hogsheads, and many posters and advertising signs. Also featured in the small meeting room of the museum is a recently created Wall of Honor entitled "Fairmont's Finest," which displays attractive plaques of leading citizens who played a role in our town's rise to agricultural prominence. In addition, the Wall features portraits and information about noted author and *New Yorker* magazine writer Joseph Mitchell, who was a native of Fairmont, and famed tobacco sales supervisor

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Charlie Stafford. Periodicals, scrapbooks, photographs, and much more literature round out the historic appeal of the facility. The museum also has memorabilia and souvenirs for sale.

Tours can be on an individual basis during regular hours or by special arrangement for groups. Student and tourist tours are especially welcome. The museum's parent organization, The Border Belt Historical Society, promotes a love of local history and has a membership of hundreds of local citizens. Since joining the museum in

January, former Mayor Charles Kemp has been successful in obtaining new directional signage to the facility; acquiring email addresses from state museums and of 200 bus tour companies along the East Coast, which are being used to introduce and promote the museum more widely; and arranging the printing of colorful brochures and distributing them to all N.C. Welcome Centers and other facilities statewide. Paralleling the brochures has been the creation of a brand new interactive website. Recently the museum has seen an increase in visitors

along with several very prominent new exhibits being donated by area citizens including a new ground plow dating from 1784 and a farm bell which is rung at the opening and closing each day.

The Border Belt Farmers Museum & Welcome Center is opening its doors wide to all our history-loving friends to visit and learn more about the rich agricultural past that we are proud of in Fairmont N. C. We hope to see you soon.

Member News Briefs

The **EDENTON HISTORICAL COMMISSION** reports that the restored Roanoke River Lighthouse was dedicated on August 15. The commission originally purchased this 1886 structure several years ago and gave it to the state, which funded restoration of this historic landmark. For more information, visit www.edentonlighthouse.org.

FEDERAL POINT HISTORIC PRESERVATION SOCIETY in Carolina Beach has formed a unique partnership with Cape Fear Camera Club to help increase the society's digital collection of images of the area. Throughout the club's 2013-2014 year, club members photographed landscapes, businesses, architecture, residents, flora, and fauna. These images were then added to the society's collection.

The **GASTON COUNTY MUSEUM** is seeking stories, photographs, and artifacts for an upcoming exhibit on the history of Gaston Memorial Hospital. The exhibit will trace the hospital's roots in 1908 and end with the current CaroMont Hospital. If you have any stories you would like to share about your time as a patient or staff member at one of these hospitals, or have an item you would be willing to loan to help tell the history, contact Stephanie Elliott at Stephanie.elliott@gastongov.com.

PRESERVATION CHAPEL HILL hosted more than 100 preservationists for its first annual "Roots of the

Piedmont: History and Preservation in the Central North Carolina" symposium. Attendees spent the two days celebrating preservation successes, brainstorming challenges, and planning for the future of preservation in the region.

PRESERVATION NC is celebrating its 75th anniversary in 2014. Throughout the year PNC has been offering tours showcasing important historic properties it has protected from the mountains to the sea. PNC has saved more than 700 historic properties in 75 years. To learn more, visit www.presnc.org.

RALEIGH CITY CEMETERY PRESERVATION, INC. invites donations to help it to restore the graves and markers of the Peace family, which includes William Peace, benefactor of Peace University. The \$60,000 fundraising campaign will pay for the restoration of five graves and the repair of the stone wall and fence around the plot in the Raleigh City Cemetery. RCCP, the City of Raleigh Parks and Recreation Department, and restoration expert Dean Ruedrich have started work on this project, with the support of Peace University, but money is still needed. To learn more, visit www.rccpreservation.org; to donate, mail checks to Raleigh City Cemeteries Preservation, Inc., PO Box 33012, Raleigh, NC 27636.